

John Updike:

His Place in American Literature

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November 12, 2008, Benaroya Hall, Seattle, Washington. Sold-out crowd, buzzing with anticipation. Ram-rod straight, shock of thick white hair gracing his brow, pleasantly smiling, John Updike enters the auditorium. The audience vigorously applauds, eager to hear the conversation between Mr. Updike and his two interviewers. There is no sign of illness, yet he would be dead in two months.

This interview was his next to last public appearance; John Updike died on January 27, 2009. Although suffering from lung cancer and an accompanying pneumonia, he insisted that he fulfill the four scheduled appearances on a west coast tour because “people had already bought their tickets and were counting on me.”

Our excellent seats were due to daughter Jennifer being a patron of the sponsoring organization, Seattle Arts and Letters. Our names were also on the guest list for a small reception at the Seattle Art Museum following his interview. Their newly opened exhibit, “Hopper Women,” was scheduled to coincide with Mr. Updike’s appearance. He was a great fan of Edward Hopper and, over the years, had written extensively about Hopper’s work. Yes, we did talk with Mr. Updike, and yes, in poor health and 76 years of age, he charmed both of us.

His interviewers, author David Huterson and a curator of the Seattle Art Museum, Patricia Junker, divided their questions between the visual arts and his writing. His comments were thoughtful, wise, clever and often funny. At times it reminded me of hearing William Buckley. As

with both men, I wasn't always absolutely certain of every nuance, but their words were so beautifully chosen and spoken that it didn't matter.

John Updike had a lengthy, prolific life as a writer, opening a wide lens on the American middle class during the second half of the twentieth century. He wrote with insight and wit, with words crafted with an artist's eye. Mr. Updike had a life-long interest in art, beginning in childhood when his mother arranged for his first drawing lessons. Painting had taught him "how difficult it is to see things exactly as they are, and that the painting is 'there' as a book is not."

New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani said, "Mr. Updike was endowed with an art student's pictorial imagination, a journalist's sociological eye, and a poet's gift for metaphor." She felt that John Updike's art background helped him to televise his work. She believed that seeing is a mental description; seeing it in his own mind he then transferred it to the reader's as best he could.

Mr. Updike believed "the world deserved describing, observed and hymned. With writing and art, we show the world our admiration, and express thanks that we are here. It is my intention to describe the world as the Psalmists did."

John Updike said, "I've never ventured too far from what I could verify with my own eyes." However, he did try to expand his horizons and get out of the American middle class writing books about both Africa and

Brazil. But basically his own life was his primary window for observing life in America. His writing spoke of his generation of silent Americans, particularly men, who grew up with the influence of World War II and the nations' austerity, then found themselves, as he said, "bemused participants in the singing sixties and the decades of consumer excess."

In a narrow sense, Mr. Updike's subject was the American Protestant small-town middle class. In a broader sense, his writing focused on who ordinary Americans are. As he wrote of these lives and their struggles, he showed ordinary life, its daily rhythms, rituals, and happenings, as being important to write about.

He once described himself as "a literary spy within average, public school, supermarket America." He said his only duty was to describe reality as it had come to him and, as he is often quoted: "To give the mundane its beautiful due."

When responding to why most of his novels were about the lives of ordinary Americans, Mr. Updike said, "The writer must face the fact that ordinary lives are what most people live most of the time, and that the novel as a narration of the fantastic and the adventurous is really an escapist plot, that aesthetically the ordinary, the banal, is what you must deal with. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me, without doubt, worthwhile to examine what it is."

John Updike spoke of D.H. Lawrence who once said that the business of the novelist is to stretch your sympathies and take them to unexpected places. Middle and upper class people read about thieves, coal miners, low lives and become better people because they enter other lives that they never lived nor wanted to live. They understand other possibilities in life as other ways of living become more real to them.

Bill Savage, English professor at Northwestern University, voiced concern about a recurring strain of misogyny in Mr. Updike's writing about women. Savage felt Updike's women were often demanding and shrewish, lacking the emotional complexity of his male characters. In defense, Mr. Updike said that the right to dislike, desire, and misjudge the opposite sex is one of things both genders have in common.

During the interview in Seattle, John Updike emphasized his belief that in writing books, you can't worry about offending readers. Fiction to him should be surprising and sometimes abrasive. It should be in your face. However, he did admit to losing readers because they think he is sexist. His response was he has raised two daughters, the best he could, and cared deeply for his wife, but that you have to "sing your own songs, to write your own books."

John Hoyer Updike was born on March 18, 1932 in Reading, Pennsylvania and spent his early years in nearby small town, Shillington. The area around Shillington provided the setting for many of his stories, with the invented towns of Brewer and Olinger

substituting for Reading and Shillington. He loved the Reading area so much that when writing *Rabbit Run*, he imagined Rabbit living there.

Mr. Updike and his parents shared a house with his maternal grandparents for much of his childhood. His father Wesley was a junior high school math teacher. His mother, Linda Hoyer Updike, received a masters' degree in English from Cornell in 1971 and always hoped to be a writer. She published only two collections of stories, *Enchantment* in 1971 and, *The Predator* in 1990. When Linda was asked about her son's fame, she answered: "I'd rather it had been me." We will never know if this was just a quip.

The town of Shillington remained his favorite place. "Shillington was my here...I loved Shillington not as one loves Capri or New York, because they are special, but as one loves one's own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being." He had the sense of belonging, of coming from a place where his name carried meaning.

At age 13 John Updike's family moved to his mother's birthplace, a stone farmhouse on an 80-acre farm near Plowville. He and his father commuted back to Schillington daily where his father continued to teach at the same school, and John continued his studies with his class. John saw a lot more of his father than most boys do. He said that they went back and forth together and had adventures. He wrote extensively

about these times together, but his novel, *The Centaur*, was his main tribute to his father and the time spent with him.

He did well in school and was President and co-valedictorian of his high school graduating class. As only children often tend to do, John read a lot. He loved the Reading library and spoke of it as a wonderful haven and palace. He devoured books by Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, and Erle Stanley Gardner; he said that he read around 40 of Gardner's books. Loving mysteries, he tried to write one. To write a mystery, he understood he had to start plotting, working backwards. He said he really couldn't do it. "I'm not saying I couldn't do it if a gun was put to my head, but it felt unnatural."

In his early life, he loved the visual arts best. John Updike enjoyed his childhood drawing and painting lessons. When he attended Harvard College on full scholarship, he took art classes from Hyman Bloom and was chosen to be a cartoonist on the Harvard Lampoon staff. Realizing how gifted the other cartoonists were, he soon saw a ceiling to his own cartooning ability. He did not sense the same ceiling for his writing.

John Updike and his wife Mary went to Oxford, following his graduating summa cum laude from Harvard. There he enjoyed his studies at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts on a Knox scholarship. Drawing had always been his passion, but it was soon confirmed to him that writing was his calling and that he could draw with words. When asked about his decision to become a writer, Mr. Updike said it was mainly

because of his lack of motivation for a nine-to-five job. He then admitted that it was the joy of creation that captured him.

During his year at Oxford, he met E. B. and Katherine White, founders of *The New Yorker* in 1925. They encouraged him to apply to the magazine for a regular job. When he left Oxford, he accepted a job at *The New Yorker*, writing editorials, features, reviews, and stories. He discovered he could do this well, and he enjoyed doing it.

Not happy living in New York, he moved his family to small town Ipswich, Massachusetts where he freelanced and continued to write for the *The New Yorker*. In New York, he was a writer surrounded by writers. In Shillington, he enjoyed small town life, including activities like playing in a recorder group with his wife. He was happy to be rid of big city literary events. In a small town, he believed life was more real. This attitude reminds me of Warren Buffet when asked why he lived in Omaha. He responded that he saw things more clearly from Omaha.

Mr. Updike's first dream had been to be a cartoonist, then to be a poet; but realizing you couldn't make a living writing poetry, he decided to try being a novelist. When he first attempted fiction, John Updike said, "it's sort of like a horse you don't know is there, but if you jump on the back there is something under you that begins to move and gallop. So it's clearly a wonderful imaginary world that you enter when you begin to write fiction." Mr. Updike's goal in writing fiction was to make an

unadventurous situation seem adventurous and to excite the reader as they see the multiple levels of reality.

Not long after moving to Massachusetts, Mr. Updike decided to try to support his family by writing full time without taking a salaried position. He saw what happened to his mother and knew that the odds were against him, but he decided to give himself five years. If he hadn't been successful by then, he would know he didn't have what it took.

Updike stuck doggedly to his regime of writing several hours every morning, six days a week, a schedule he followed the rest of his career. He believed the writer's life should imitate Shakespeare's: "a steady, abundant, and varied output, with the author himself completely invisible."

His daily writing completed, he often answered his correspondence, promptly and politely in his own inimitable stylish, charming way. If he knew the person was a golf enthusiast, his correspondence often included a report on his game. He also often shared a golf tip or two. Correspondence completed, he frequently played a round of golf with his buddies.

Mr. Updike described himself as "just a freelance writer living in Massachusetts," but Adam Hopnik, writer for *The New Yorker*, said that many of his colleagues believed he was "one of the greatest of all modern writers, the first American writer since Henry James to get

himself fully expressed, the man who broke the curse of incompleteness that had haunted American writing...he fulfilled Virginia Woolf's dictum that the writer's job is to get himself or herself expressed without impediments, to do so as Shakespeare and Jane Austen did without hate or pause or protest or obvious special pleasing – or the thousand other ills that the embattled writer is heir to.. to get his or her real experience down.”

In his writing, three distinct areas are apparent: his patriotism, his strong religious faith, and sex. . He openly loved his country. Both his patriotism and his faith connected him to his lower middle class roots.

In much of his writing, he showed his strong interest in moral and philosophical questions, sparked by his lifelong interest in philosophy and Christian theology. His Christian faith, influenced strongly by Karl Barth's writings, was an optimistic faith.

In his sexual explicitness, he used sex as part of a “continuum of sensation in which we live.” With many of his characters, sex is a reprieve, an escape from daily life. Updike described sex as an “imaginary quest.” A character in one of his novels remarked, “Adultery is a way of giving yourself adventures.”

My personal favorite Updike writings are his short stories. The publication of two collections of short stories, *The Same Door* (1959) and *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) established Mr. Updike's reputation as a

clever craftsman. *My Father's Tears* (2009), his final collection of short stories was published the year he died. As with his novels, he was always inventive and clever as he wrote of ordinary people, simple things, and commonplace events. His stories celebrated the past and searched for the indomitable spirit of the future.

“Updike sang like Henry James, but he saw like Sinclair Lewis,” said Adam Gopnik, in his eulogy to Updike. Listen to the singing in this passage from a short story, *Museums and Women*, originally printed in *The New Yorker*, November 18, 1967:

“She was the friend of a friend, and she and I, having had lunch with the mutual friend, bade him goodbye and, both being loose in New York for the afternoon, went to a museum together. It was a new one, recently completed after the plan of a recently dead America Wizard. It was shaped like a truncated top and its floor was a continuous spiral around an overweening core of empty vertical space. From the leaning shining walls, immense rectangles of torn and spattered canvas projected on thin arms of bent pipe. Menacing magnifications of textural accidents, they needed to be viewed at a distance greater than the architecture afforded. The floor width was limited by a rather slender and low concrete guard wall that more invited than discouraged a plunge into the cathedral depths below. Too reverent to scoff and too dizzy to judge, my unexpected companion and I dutifully unwound our way down the exitless ramp, locked in a wizard’s spell. Suddenly, as she lurched backward from one especially explosive painting, her high heels

were tricked by the slope, and she fell against me and squeezed my arm. Ferocious gumbos splashed on one side of us; the siren chasm called on the other. She righted herself but did not let go of my arm. Pointing my eyes ahead, inhaling the presence of perfume, feeling like a cliff climber whose companion has panicked on the sheerest part of the face, I accommodated my arm to her grip and, thus secured, we carefully descended the remainder of the museum. Not until our feet touched the safety of street level were we released. Our bodies separated and did not touch again.”

John Updike’s twenty-three novels took on American social history. Mr. Updike won early fame with his novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960). Sequels, *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), each chronicled middle class American life through the social upheavals beginning in the 1960’s. *Rabbit Run* and *Couples* (1968) both raised controversy with their depiction of American’s changing sexual mores.

Most people agree that Mr. Updike is best known for his Rabbit books. Updike’s four Rabbit books, *Rabbit Run*, *Rabbit Redux*, *Rabbit is Rich*, and *Rabbit_at Rest*, were written between 1960 and 1990. In an interview with the National Book Foundation, Mr. Updike said he saw Rabbit as “the kind of guy who won’t hold still, who won’t make a commitment, who won’t quite pull his load in society, a guy who once was somebody and then everything afterwards runs downhill.”

Rabbit isn't a hero who is killed, or a boy on a raft with a runaway slave, or an expat in Spain. He is a regular guy. Rabbit is an ex-high school basketball star in a small town; he runs a Toyota dealership owned by his father-in-law; he has affairs; he remains married; and he has a disappointing son. Yet Rabbit's life has a somewhat glamorous truth and mystery about it.

Mr. Updike both portrays and dissects Rabbit's life, in a process similar to Flaubert portraying the doomed Emma Bovary. Rabbit was the common man who saw protest and disturbance, distress, drug use. He was a developing man trying to cope. Mr. Updike chronicled his life over four decades, creating a character with whom we can relate. With each additional book, Rabbit, Updike, and America grew up together. Mr. Updike said, "In the Rabbit books, I pushed against and into American's Puritan sensibilities, my own Lutheran upbringing, and the current events of his time."

Harry Angstrom, Rabbit, Updike's alter ego and hero, has his final heart attack after the epiphany that the department-store Christmases of his childhood and the wonderful pop music of his adolescence were "both calculated commercial frauds." His attack occurs on the basketball court where he is playing a game with a young teen. Here was the place he was happiest; it is where he was the real Rabbit. He died flawed, but comforted. He imagines how his granddaughter sees the world with "every little thing vivid and sharp and new, packed full of itself like a satin valentine."

For John Updike a strong theme was the American effort to fill the gap of diminished faith with the material life. He described how the death of a religious belief has been replaced by sex, movies, sports, cars, family obligation. Mr. Updike believed this effort was almost successful. He chronicled the depression's decade of deprivation and postwar material abundance. In his 1996 novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, he makes this apparent: "the death of American religion is matched by the rise of American movies."

In 1963, John Updike received the National Book Award for his novel *The Centaur*. The next year at age 32, he became the youngest person ever to be elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, being invited on a State Department tour of Eastern Europe as part of a cultural exchange program between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The social excitements of the 60's had a strong impact on Mr. Updike. A sexual revolution was happening in the lives of the young couples around him. "We smoked pot, wore love beads and frugged ourselves into a lather while the Beatles and Janis Joplin sang away on the hi fi set."

John Updike enjoyed immediate fame with his fifth novel *Couples* (1968). Creating a national sensation, he portrayed relationships among a group of young suburban couples where money and the pill disrupted the lives of 10 couples. John Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War,

civil rights struggles, scarcely interfered with their sexual lives. Mr. Updike didn't make moral judgments on their infidelities. He observed and described them as he believed a novelist should.

After *Bech: a Book* was on the best-seller lists for over a year, a Time Magazine cover story featured John Updike. In this novel, he created his new protagonist, the novelist Henry Bech, who, like Rabbit Angstrom, reappeared in Updike's fiction for years.

In the 1970's, Updike continued to travel as a cultural ambassador for the United States, and in 1974, along with authors John Cheever, Arthur Miller and Richard Wilburn, he called on the Soviet government to cease persecution of author Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Rabbit is Rich (1981) received many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In 1983 Updike's other alter ego, Harry Bech, reappeared in *Bech is Back*, and Updike was featured again in a *Time Magazine* cover story, "Going Great at 50." In 1991, he received a second Pulitzer Prize for *Rabbit at Rest*.

Mr. Updike continued his position as lead reviewer for *The New Yorker* for three decades celebrating good writing of all kinds. When asked what reviewing had done for him, he answered that when you wrote for three or four hours, "your appetite for words rather diminished, so it's all too easy to not read much, so the review did keep me reading and acquainted with trends. Trends is what we do with this, our dinosaur,

the novel. You can't repeat *Ulysses*, but that is an example of a novel that really tried to do everything. So we post moderns are faced with this notion that maybe we're not taking it far enough. We're accepting old conventions like the quote marks, the "he said, she said" when we had these experimental writers who have done so much. So anyway, it's good in a way to make yourself think about these basic issues. Why are you doing this at all? What are you bringing to it that is different? Are you just feeding the machine or are you in some way altering it?"

Updike wrote over 60 books, novels, collections of short stories, poems, art criticisms, memoirs, dramas, essays, and literary criticisms. Awards other than those previously mentioned include the Rosenthal Award, the Howells Medal, the Signet Society Medal for Achievement in the Arts, the Edward McDowell Medal for Literature, the Distinguished Pennsylvania Arts Award, the Lincoln Literary Award, the National Arts Club Medal of Honor, and the 1998 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Jesuit magazine, *America*, honored him with its Champion Award in 1979 as a distinguished Christian person of letters.

John Updike received the National Medal of Art from President George H.W. Bush in 1989, and in 2003, was presented with the National Medal for the Humanities from President George W. Bush. He was one of a very few Americans to received both honors. I found this particularly interesting since John Updike was a Democrat.

Mr. Updike's last years were spent in Beverly Farms, in the area where much of his fiction is set. His last novel was *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), a sequel to his 1984 novel *The Witches of Eastwick*.

"Despite being in Beverly Farms, far away from the literary center, Mr. Updike cast an enormous shadow", said Charles McGrath of the *New York Times*. "He was a father figure to generations of other writers – an influence not in a benign, encouraging way. What writers, young and old, learned from and prized about Mr. Updike was his prose – that amazing instrument, like a jeweler's loupe; so precise, exquisitely attentive and seemingly effortless."

Last week I received an email from Fort Wayne's Music Director, Andrew Constantine, who had just attended a dinner for his Orchestra in Reading. When a mutual friend asked about me, because of John Updike growing up in the Reading area, Andrew mentioned this paper. Two days later I received this information from Chip Kidd, a guest at the dinner and a book cover designer for Knopf:

"My relationship to Mr. Updike and his work was varied and curious. First, I was born and raised in the exact same small town (Shillington). Wesley, his father, was my father's high-school math teacher, and they were quite fond of each other. As I grew up, my dad would regale us with stories about the "real" Harry Angstrom, Rabbit, a former local Shillington High basketball star since gone to seed.

In college, my first assignment in Introduction to Graphic Design, was to create a cover for Updike's *Museums and Women*. My solution, which I thought was brilliant and which certainly was not, was roundly dismissed by my teacher, who suggested that perhaps I was better suited to another line of work.

So it was more than a little-what? Ironic? Fateful?-that I would be hired directly out of school to be a book-jacket designer at Knopf, eventually designing covers for....you guessed it. Working with and for Mr. Updike over the decades was an honor and a treat, and because he was so prolific, not only in quantity but in types of books, there were so many different design scenarios. One extreme was his habit of drawing up, by hand, the entire cover layout, including type specs, which either I or another of us in the art department, would then execute. On the other end of the spectrum, he would let us do whatever we wanted. The last book of his I worked on, *Terrorist*, was a very happy collaboration. He had found the art, but I ended up laying it out in a way he didn't expect at all yet was delighted by. I turned it upside down. I feel so incredibly fortunate and proud to have known and worked with this truly great American artist."

Four days ago Mr. Kidd sent me another email containing this bittersweet story. "Two months ago I was seated next to John Updike's widow, Martha, at a dinner at the Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City, honoring his memory. I had not met her before, but we sort of hit it off, and in due time she told me that through-out their years

together, whatever he was writing, whether a novel, a book review, whatever for the New Yorker, he would work late into the night and the next morning there would be a print-out of it sitting on the end table next to her side of the bed, with a single sharpened pencil laying atop. The implication was for her to read it and make comments/corrections. She never, ever did.”

Even the Boston Red Sox issued condolences for their fan John Updike upon learning of his death. He had witnessed a magic moment in Red Sox history when Ted Williams played his last game on September 28, 1960. From Updike’s meditation on the event, *Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu*:

“The ball climbed on a diagonal line into the vast volume of air over centerfield. From my angle, behind third base, the ball seemed less an object in flight than the tip of a towering, motionless construct, like the Eiffel Tower or the Tappan Zee Bridge. It was in the books while it was still in the sky.” Zach Barron of the Village Voice calls this meditation the best baseball piece ever. Mr. Updike wrote no other.

More tributes and comments about John Updike:

Joyce Carol Oates wrote that Mr. Updike was “a master like Flaubert, of mesmerizing us with his narrative voice even as he might repel us with the vanities of human desire his scalpel exposed.”

British novelist Martin Amis said, “Updike has taught me a good deal about American culture and history, computer science, physics, Africa

and Brazil, witchcraft, sex, religion, art, and a wealth of other topics. He is a master of all trades, able to crank himself up to PhD level on any subject he fancies.”

Philip Roth wrote, “Updike knows so much, about golf, about porn, about kids, about America. I don’t know anything about anything. His hero is a Toyota salesman. Updike knows everything about being a Toyota salesman. Here I live in the country and I don’t even know the names of the trees. I’m going to give up writing.”

John Barth, prominent post modernist fiction writer, said of Mr. Updike, “There has been no finer writer among our contemporaries than John Updike. I’ve read him with delight for decades. He should have been awarded the Nobel Prize years ago; he would have done more to honor that prize than it to him.”

Peter Conrad, writer for the Observer, concluded an interview with Mr. Updike in late 2008 saying, “He has done more to enrich us than all of Wall Street’s banks and brokers, and his books, unlike the papery profits of the Stock exchange, will not lose their value.” Mr. Updike once sounded the closing bell on Wall Street.

He still loved poetry best. John Updike’s writing about his illness was honest, touching, and understanding. His last poem, published posthumously, is entitled “Requiem:”

“It came to me the other day;

Were I to die, no one would say,
“Oh, what a shame! So young, so full
Of promise- depths unplumbable!
Instead, a shrug and tearless eyes
Will greet my overdue demise;
The wide response will be, I know,
“I thought he died a while ago.”
For life’s a shabby subterfuge,
And death is real, and dark, and huge.
The shock of it will register
Nowhere but where it will occur.

John Updike, age 63, responded to John Marshall, writer for the Seattle Post Enquirer, when asked what he would like to see written on his tombstone. “I’d like to be thought of as someone who tried to do justice to my own talent and exploited it as fully as I could. And also as someone who was bravely honest, who tried to write generously and in a spirit of interest in his fellow man.”